

THE TRAIL OF 98



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Wherever the frontiers of a country are rolled back, the community soon begins to clamor for the same amenities and services enjoyed in older established areas. The story of the Trail of '98 proved no exception to this. Thus, when the booming community of Dawson sent out its call for the services of a banking institution, The Canadian Bank of Commerce (now Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce) was quick to respond.

In this booklet we give just a few of the highlights of that unique period in our history:

Eggs at eighteen dollars a dozen, and ale at five dollars a pint; the office cat giving birth to kittens worth one hundred dollars apiece; or a lady of easy virtue enquiring from the bank manager if he knew the whereabouts of her "tights and slippers".

Fantasy? Not at all, in the daily routine of the bank employees who braved the Trail of '98, to open the first Commerce branch in the Klondike. The setting is the bustling community of Dawson, lying a scant 175 miles south of the Arctic Circle, and bearing the name of a Canadian government geologist. From a tiny trading post in 1897, it had mushroomed within a twelve month span into a frenzied metropolis of 30,000 souls.

The story really begins in the late summer of 1896, when a prospector named George Carmack, accompanied by two Indian guides, discovered a handful of nuggets on Bonanza Creek. Though their secret remained locked in the Arctic wastes during that winter and spring, the cry of "Gold!" exploded like wildfire soon thereafter, making newspaper headlines around the world. One of the most excit-

ing chapters of Canadian history had begun.

The tide of fortune-hunters surging into this inhospitable wilderness was to capture the imagination of writers and film makers for decades to come. The vanguard of the hordes arrived even before freeze-up time in 1897, to endure incredible hardships in a land where there was gold, but relatively few things which could be bought with it. But the main wave — some 20,000 strong — came with the spring thaw of '98, and the boom was on.

Of the many who came, a few found the riches of which they had dreamed. Others stayed only long enough to snatch their fortunes, and then turn their backs on the land for all time. Among the less lucky ones were those who did not live to see their destination at all, for the perils of the road were enough to turn the stomach of the strongest man.

Snow and bone-chilling temperatures, blizzards and avalanches, and — with the advent of warmer days — perilous rivers and swarms of mosquitoes; these were some of the main adversaries of the Trail. But food and supplies were crucial



The Midnight Sun: this photograph was taken at the witching hour, on 27th June, 1899.

factors too, for they had to be packed through waist deep snows, and across back-breaking mountain passes.

The main route was by way of Skagway, Alaska, which the gold-seekers reached by boat. From there the journey continued on foot or on horseback, over either of two mountain passes, to Lake Bennett. If the traveller to this point needed reminders of the hazards he faced, he found these in the many skeletons of pack horses which littered the roadside. The poor animals had foundered upon the greed of their owners, who seemingly had been in too much of a hurry to find their precious claims of gold.

From Lake Bennett the way led through a chain of lakes and their connecting rivers all the way to Dawson. But the difficulties were far from over, for breaking ice, raging torrents and rapids took their toll as surely as the winter storms had done. It became an all too common sight, downstream on the river to Dawson, to

*Home comforts were scarce;
when the branch cat became a mother
(a Yukon rarity) the staff were offered
\$100 apiece for the kittens.*



see a wreck go floating by, in mute testimony that yet another adventurer had come to an untimely end.

But not all who braved these perils came on such glamorous missions as to seek their fortune in gold. The dramatists who later portrayed the Trail of '98 in type or technicolor all but overlooked the less "romantic" characters, who came neither for gold nor adventure, but to do the necessary tasks that every community needs to have done if it hopes to endure. And no better example could be found than the team of intrepid bankers who set out from the city of Toronto in the spring of 1898, to bring the Klondike its first branch bank. That they survived the journey at all is a tribute to their ruggedness, and the meticulous planning that had gone into the preparations for their trip. The first members of the group reached Dawson on the afternoon of June 14th and, after working far into the night to ready their temporary shack for business, opened the doors to the public the following morning.

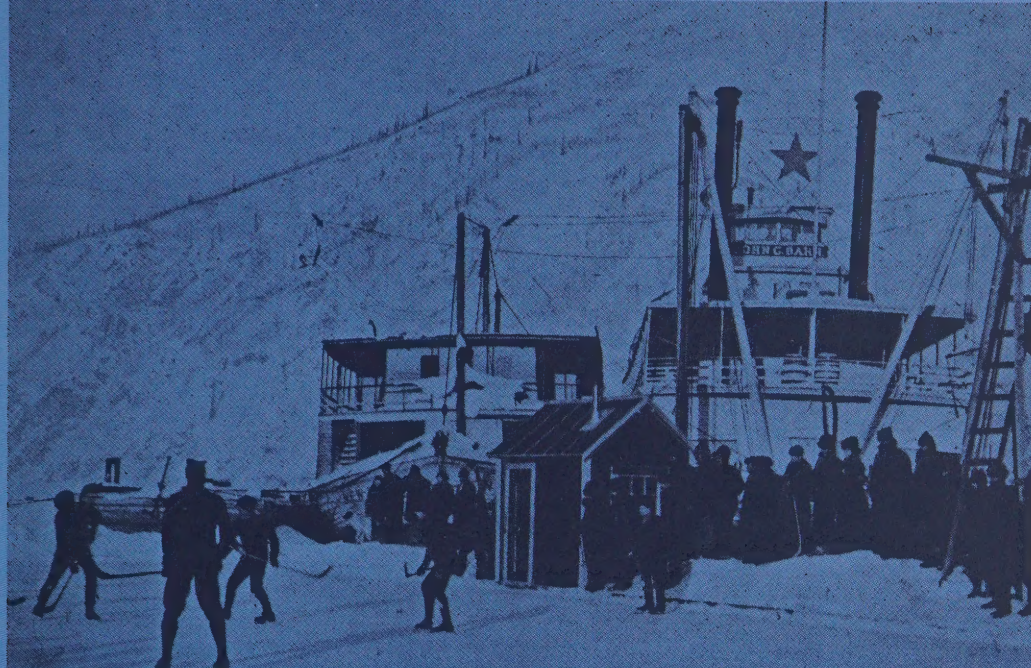


This is part of the initial banking group travelling by scow from Lake Bennett to Dawson.

The new bank not only came equipped to handle the assaying of gold dust, but it also introduced a useful “commodity” in the form of bank notes. Until that time few notes and coins had been seen in Dawson, and gold dust was the generally accepted currency of the realm. The Yukoner bought most of his supplies with this dust and, when he entered a saloon for his favorite brand of red-eye, he simply handed his “poke” to the bartender. It did not trouble him too much that the latter was sure to extract a pinch or two for himself, on his way to and from

the weighing scales.

The supply of bank notes, incidentally, exposed the banking team to a hazard on the Trail which the rest of the adventurers had not had to face. It was well known that a thug named “Soapy Smith” had his headquarters in Skagway, and that he and his henchmen would hardly fail to notice the locked wooden crate into which the bank notes had been packed for shipment. Even before the boat from Vancouver docked at Skagway, the bankers decided to do away with the crate, by dis-



Outdoor hockey in March 1900. In this isolated community, home grown sports had a greater impact than any modern Stanley Cup playoff series.

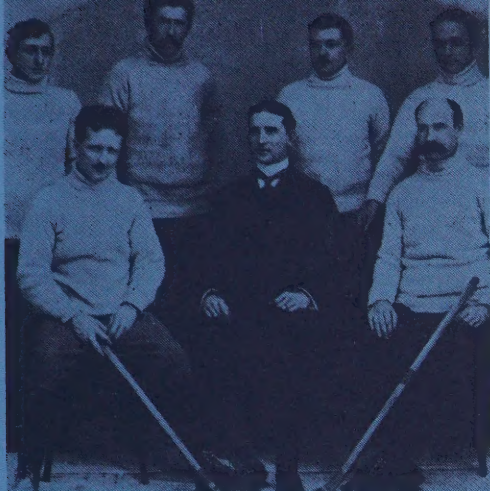
mantling it quietly and throwing the pieces out of the cabin port-hole. The notes were then deployed amongst the personal effects in the travellers' kit-bags and, while these were never let out of sight, no too obvious precautions were taken to guard them. When the Skagway customs officers were alerted to this ruse beforehand, they offered their cooperation willingly.

But, while Soapy Smith may have been foiled on this occasion, his shenanigans were far from over. One of his best re-

membered exploits was his apparent kindness to a parson who was on a fund raising drive in Skagway. Making no secret of his own shortcomings, Soapy accompanied the reverend gentleman on his mission through town, and did most of the talking for him. The local citizens all knew better than to refuse a request of Soapy's, with the result that the goal of \$2,000 in cash was collected in record time. But later on, with Soapy himself nowhere in evidence, the latter's gang held up the parson and relieved him of his bundle.

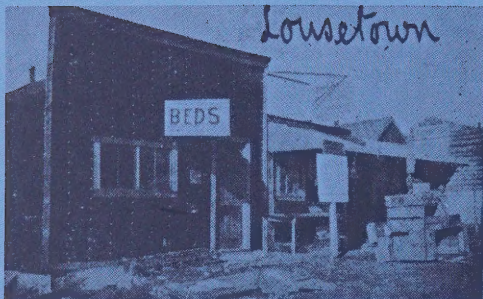


Our staff, Dawson, 1899: the fur coats were purchased by the Bank, but no minks.

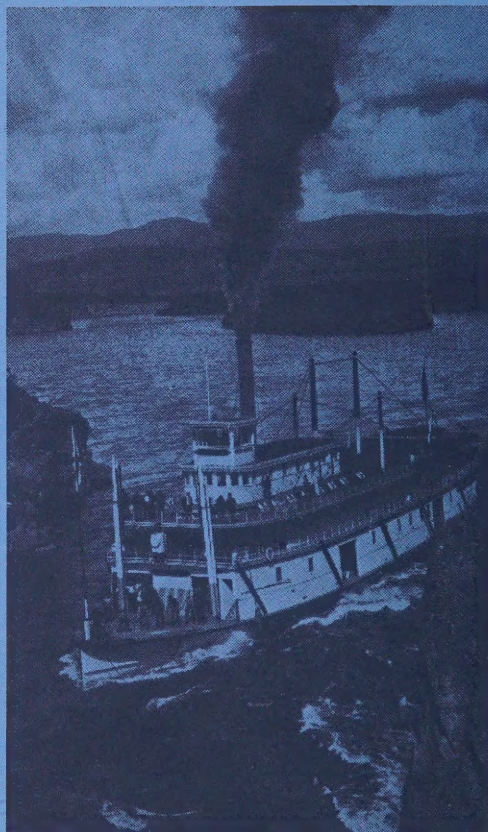


The Bank's Dawson hockey team.

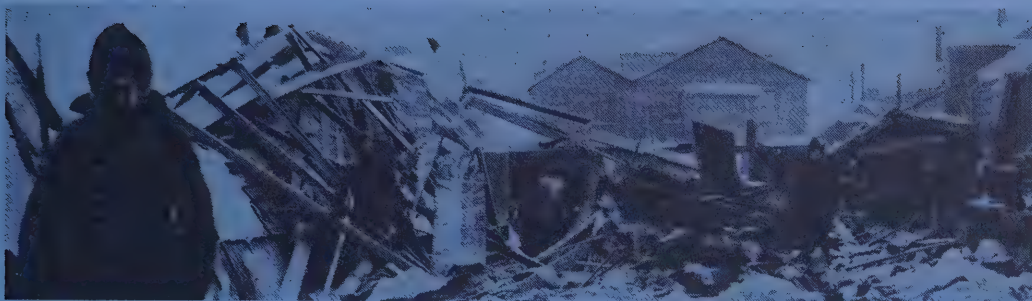
Meanwhile, in the newly opened bank in Dawson, life for the staff was anything but dull. Not the least of their problems was that of getting a proper night's rest, because of the incessant revelry in the streets during the perpetual mid-summer daylight. But, whether they managed to sleep or not, their routine on getting up was enough to make them soon forget the rigors of the night. In those first weeks their crammed quarters boasted nothing so lavish as a washroom, and at seven each morning the bank messenger was despatched to bring a supply of water from the river. The bankers thereupon took their towels and basins to the most convenient spot, which happened to be in front of the entrance door. Usually there was already a line-up of customers waiting for the bank to open, and these were simply urged to be patient while the morning ablutions were being completed.



The name given this "residential suburb" was probably all too realistic.



The steamboat — "Here she comes!" — bringing new "cheechakos", mail, news and supplies. There was not a more welcome sight in the old Yukon.



Mounties guard the ruins of our branch after a fire in January 1901. The vault was intact. The R.N.W.M.P. maintained law and order to a degree envied by many another community.

A problem which the bankers shared with all others was the unbelievably high cost of living. With candles and apples selling for a dollar apiece, if they were available at all, the bank manager felt compelled to write his head office one day that "there is nothing that can be bought for less than fifty cents, no matter how small it is". And this was in an age when the word "inflation" meant little more to the average person than

the act of filling a balloon with air.

When the supply boat docked one day, an entrepreneur paid \$150 for the latest copy of a Seattle newspaper, which sum he quickly recouped from citizens willing to share this treasure with him — at five dollars a head! The hall he hired for the purpose was filled to overflowing with people who probably came as much for the diversion as for the privilege of paying for some month-old news.



These bankers looked rugged
← enough to handle themselves in
rough company.

One incident which the bank manager may not have been eager to report to head office was that of a gaudily clad lady named Caprice, who came to ask if he had her “tights and slippers”. When the red-faced manager informed her, with what dignity he could muster, that she was in a bank, she replied, “Sure. The Bank of Commerce, isn’t it? Joe Brooks told me he’d send them here”. And Caprice turned out to be right, for in an as yet unopened parcel received by the bank, the missing articles were duly brought to light.



In December 1898 the Bank established an office in Skagway, Alaska. Here we see the damage wrought by a hold-up man who accidentally set off some dynamite sticks in his possession, killing himself in the process. Luckily, no one else was seriously injured.

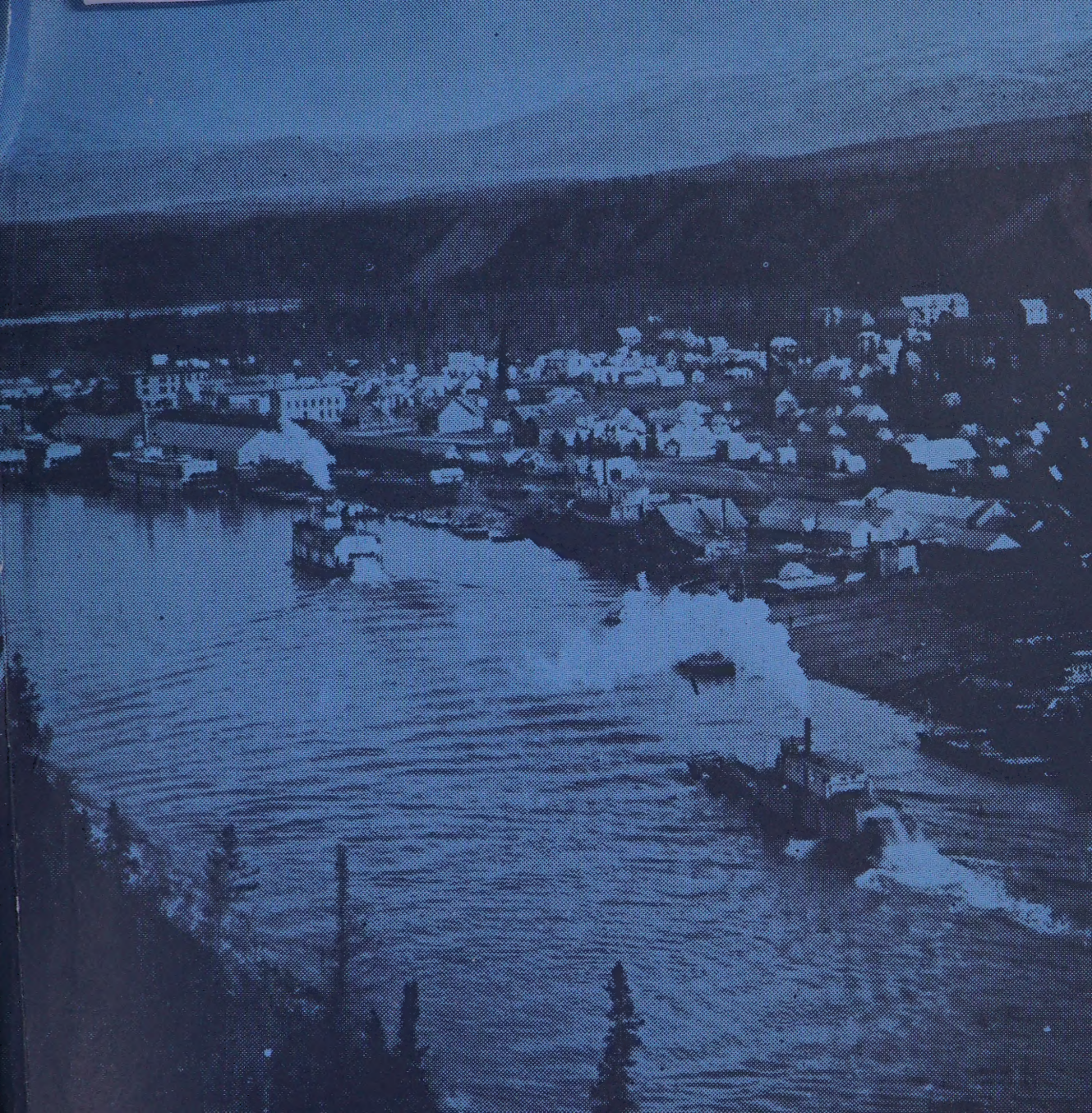
*Whitehorse, in June 1901;
14 months after our branch opened
there. Note heavy steamer traffic.*

No story of Yukon days would, of course, be complete without mention of that erstwhile bank clerk and poet, Robert W. Service. Though he did not make his appearance there until the year 1904, when he was attached to the Commerce branch at Whitehorse, he soon became an integral part of the scene.

Even so, his fame might never have gotten off the ground if a fellow banker had taken more careful aim when firing his revolver through a trap-door at midnight. The would-be marksman was a newly arrived ledger-keeper, who also happened to be a championship class tennis player. The story goes that he lay asleep one night, in the staff quarters above the bank, dreaming that he was playing against two tennis experts and trouncing them both. When his pleasant reverie was interrupted by a noise in the bank downstairs, he crawled with his revolver to the trap-door overlooking the vault. Becoming aware of a dim figure moving in the shadows below, he drew aim and fired.

No doubt the fates were kind to both marksman and prey that night, for the intruder was none other than Robert Service pecking out "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" on the office typewriter. That poem, incidentally, was intended for recitation at church next Sunday, but at the last moment it was ruled unsuitable for such an occasion. Nevertheless, it was stored away with other works of the author, until the day when a Toronto printing house recognized the immortal lines for what they were.

Today, three quarters of a century later, the world still recalls the colorful names and jargon of this unobtrusive bank clerk who, but for a revolver shot which missed its mark, might have had finis written to his fame even before it was launched. Those who knew him best agreed that no one ever again so fully captured the essence of this strange land, its life and its people.



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THAT GREAT BANK IN THE SKY

The Canadian Northwest is a unique and mysterious land, extending far from the original reaches of the Trail of '98. One of its mysteries is how the 1700 people living in the remote and nearly forgotten communities of Port Radium, Coppermine, Holman Island and Cambridge Bay ever get to the Bank.

They don't — our Bank gets to them. In fact, one of the most unusual sights in this region of the Northwest Territories is the arctic branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce — a DC-3 airplane. Once a month it flies out of the territorial capital, Yellowknife, to visit these isolated communities of the north.

This may be our only airplane. But it's not our only branch. The Commerce has over 1500 branches across Canada (none of which fly). In British Columbia alone, we have 216 branches. We also have branches in Washington, Oregon and across California we're known as the California Canadian Bank.



**CANADIAN IMPERIAL
BANK OF COMMERCE**

HEAD OFFICE, COMMERCE COURT, TORONTO, CANADA